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The Chestnut Case: From a Single Action to a Broad Campaign

1 Introduction

Basically, if I refer to the Chestnut Case in this article, I will not describe a typical project held at school. Moreover, I will focus on a personal experience, on an almost coincidental situation of actuality which leads into a substantial learning atmosphere in which the students become attached to politics. On the one hand, the Chestnut Case not only shows aspects of ecological education by preserving a tree from dying, on the other hand, it also openly displays how a political issue may change every day life at school and its political culture.

The center of the Chestnut Case is the Friedrich-Schiller-Gymnasium (high school), one of five Gymnasiums, in Weimar, Germany. Its history is long and deeply rooted in the ideal of traditional schools that are committed to higher education. Immediately after its foundation, the school had placed a scientific emphasis in its curriculum which is still valid. In the former GDR the school had been the only Erweiterte Oberschule (high school) in Weimar. Since 1927 it has been situated in a building of Weimarian Bauhaus style which was built by architect Lehrmann. While the school building is known as the oldest high rise in the city, the surrounding houses were built by the end of the 19th century, the years of Germany's foundation.

Until 1995 the corpus delicti – an old chestnut tree – had then characterized a free property in the school's direct neighborhood. The tree provided a lot of shade to the school grounds. It was also a natural clock which modestly reminded the students of the time of the year by its flowering times such as its buds, its blossoms and its chestnuts until it finally casted its leaves. This terrain was the city's property and was sold to a private investor without any constructional conditions – although the school had put an effort to buy the property, too. In retrospect this sale triggers the following pedagogical and political events because the new owner seems not to care for the specific grown constructional surrounding scenery:

The new owner plans to build an apartment house with an underground car park for 27 cars. Therefore, the almost 100 year old chestnut tree, which is part of the property, becomes the source of conflict and the center of the following campaign.

2 An Anonymous Appeal

On Thursday, May 11th, 1995 the students are surprised: A letter is hooked at the front door of their school. Nobody who wanted to raise his voice for the chestnut tree, signed it.

SOS ... SOS ... SOS

Dear students!

I am the big, old chestnut tree on the north of your school grounds – on the opposite of the Schwanseebad (public swimming pool) – and I have seen lots of generations of you come and go! Soon I shall be cut down in order to pave the way for building a car park! I urge you to come and help me, please, in order to save my life!

Those who want to help will meet next to me at the railing during the break.

- Call Dr. Folger, Vice Mayor, and Mr. Meyer, head of the Department for Environmental Affairs
- Write to the newspapers
- Prepare signs and present opinion on this case in public

I will always thank you for that by my blossoms.

Your unhappy chestnut tree

This appeal is heard. The youngsters are upset and want to take action. "This is our tree!" – calls Franziska angry. "It provides shadow, protects us from the Schwanseestraße (Schwanseestreet), and we can throw chestnuts at the boys."¹ At the same day a couple of students start to take single and at first uncoordinated actions independently. Some write texts and copy leaflets: "In order to produce as much oxygen as this old tree does, you have to plant thousand young little trees." Others start to collect signatures. Another group prepares signs in order to present their protest in public: "Why should this tree die? – Grown in 100 years and cut down in 20 minutes! This is the way how loads of trees are treated in the world." Several other activities start: the student's council holds a meeting, an extra edition of the students' newspaper is prepared, and the 5th and 6th graders discuss the case in their ethics lessons. As a result, political actions rise slowly. In order to raise awareness, the students get in touch with the decision makers: they write letters to the Vice Mayor (stellvertretender Bürgermeister), to the Mayor (Oberbürgermeister), and to the head of Department for Municipal and Environmental Affairs (Bau- und Umweltdezernent). After that they inform the media. They even write to the

¹ Thüringer Landeszeitung, May, 13th, 1997.

new owner of the property – although it is very naïve to believe that they could stop the construction project.

3 Public Relations and Talks to Politicians

At the following Friday the students spread leaflets in the city center. While the media report live, the students hand over signature lists and their petition to the Vice Mayor Dr. Folger. The participating journalists promise to report about this case and by doing so, support it. However, there are no other reactions to this. Moreover, the youngsters seem to get the impression that their point-of-view does not find any attention of both – the citizens' council and the public. The tree is still to be cut down. Because of the fact that these politicians do not seem to support the students' campaign, they discuss further actions and a new idea is born: at the weekend the property shall be protected and observed. "We will mobilize everyone to the best of one's ability," – Florian, an 8th grader, promises. "Our tree is not dead yet."²

4 The Cutting Down of the Chestnut Tree

During the last week, the investor from Erfurt, Thuringia, has closely observed the protests. Since the preparation works on the site are carried on at the weekend, the signs of protest are put aside ruthlessly. There are short dialogues between the youngsters and the construction workers. On Saturday the latter emphasize that the chestnut tree is not going to be cut down. However, on Sunday they take the chain saw. Obviously everybody should face the facts. Around 4 pm workers start to cut down single branches and pretend to purely strip off the tree in full blossom. The group of young 5th graders is not able to protect the tree any longer. The following action deeply shocks these children: while screaming and crying, they have to watch how the chestnut tree is being cut down in no time at all in despair. Finally, the tree falls. Other children and teenagers join the 5th graders at the building site; the workers leave in a hurry. The children become furious. At the same evening the Mayor of Weimar, Dr. Germer, visits the school. In order to calm down the crowd, he tries to explain the situation and says that the town denied cutting down the tree. This might be the reason what apparently caused the students loss of confidence in city's politics: the students will discover later on that the Department for Municipal Affairs (Stadtverwaltung) has given an approval to cut down the tree – although the Department for Environmental Affairs (Grünflächenamt) disapproved it. Then the Vice Mayor will call it a wrong decision and the Mayor will admit "compromises to the investor." In this situation, the cutting down of the tree was connected to a fee of 37,000 Deutsche Mark (DM). In retrospect the students get the impression that the cut down of the chestnut tree was never an object of negotiation even after they had started their activities.

² Thüringer Landeszeitung, May, 13th, 1997.

Considering this case from the current perspective, neither the government nor the investor has been able to turn this decision to their advantage. Even today – two years after these incidents – the property is still empty. Now the teenagers might think: have our massive demonstrations stopped the building project?

5 The Demonstration: Students Articulate the School's Interest

Let us get back to the current incidents. On Monday the situation seems to get out of control. Students block the school's entries in order to inform others about what happened at the weekend. Every student, 800 in total, participates in the rallies and even a couple of teachers join them. The demonstrations are held in front of the school and in its surrounding area. Several activities are organized to support their protest, for instance they design posters and a huge SOS-sign with protest slogans, a part of the tree trunk says "I lived", and on another poster students write the famous Cree Indian Prophecy: "Only after the last tree has been cut down, only then will you find that money cannot be eaten." Then they stop every single passing car on a transit road for two hours in order to explain the incident and to fix little branches and leaves to their wipers.

However, this campaign has a direct impact on the school: lessons are not held and the school is more or less paralyzed. Therefore the principle needs to take actions in order to forbid further demonstrations, as a part of his teachers require. Eventually the principle and the students reach a compromise: half of them go back to school, the other half of them carry on with their rallies on the school grounds. In the morning, the head of the Department for Building and Environmental affairs gives a full explanation of his behavior to the students and teachers. In his eyes, only the former owner was able to protect the tree. Then a female student objects that the town had been the owner itself. According to the politician it becomes obvious that this is a difficult situation for finding a solution, because of the actions taken. He advises them to file a petition for the citizen's council in Thuringia, Germany, and for the federal parliament. However, in relation to their discussed political aims this proposal does not seem reasonable; not only to the students. "It is crap to cut down a healthy tree," says Janett, 6th grader. "I didn't understand that. This man, who was sent to us today, couldn't even explain it. He always referred to the law."³ "We notice" – write Florian and Michael (13 years old) in a school's brochure – "that the officials failed when they approved to the cutting down of the tree. Moreover, we claim that we cannot trust the so-called *Greenies* and Departments of Environmental Affairs. Even the Mayor, who we informed, did anything to prevent the tree to be cut down."

³ Thüringer Landeszeitung, May, 16th, 1995.

6 Public Approval

Now the actions and its report in the media have raised the public's interest: A large number of citizens show their solidarity with the students. Letters to the editor appear in the daily newspapers, a great deal of complaints are made against the Mayor and sent to the school, as well as protest declarations are presented. By the way, one aspect is very delicate: because of the fact that the chestnut tree was cut down during the statutory dormant season, an honorary citizen brought a charge against the town. Finally, the parties are having a political dispute on this incident. In the course of this case, two of the students want to present this incident to the citizen's council – but a debate is not taking place. These two students are only able to talk shortly, then a new item of the agenda is discussed. Of course, this bad experience with institutionalized politics is disappointing, too. However, although there have been loads of setbacks in terms of *nature* there is starting a public re-thinking in Weimar. The Green Party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) writes to the students: "According to your protest, we take this occasion to order the municipal authority to protect our tree population more consequently in future than it has been done until now. Furthermore, we require them to handle specific laws and statutes more restrictive."⁴ In comparison to 1995, when healthy trees were cut down, today the municipal authority has protected several trees, yes; the tree population has even increased. In 1996 this fact was approved by the Mayor on a meeting with the *Gymnasium's* students: "Your protest movement could not prevent the chestnut tree from cutting down, but it has saved more than twenty other trees in Weimar so far."

7 Back to the Activities at School – New Projects are Founded

Step by step, the *Chestnut Case* vanished from the headlines. Does the *Schiller-Gymnasium* stay the same? Or, has the students' resistance changed the school? In fact, the students do not only react to incidences - they proactively cause change.

The first step: The youngsters cut off branches from their chestnut tree and try to raise new trees. However, the stems of the old tree do not bud. The students do not give up. They start to raise money for a new tree on their school grounds as well as in the city center and in the end they are successful: They collect over 300 DM on a single day and in total, inhabitants, teachers, and students, donate approximately 2,000 DM. Additionally, the municipal authority (Stadtverwaltung) offers 2,800 DM for new trees and a DIY-store gives them a young tree for free. An own and new planting project on the school grounds starts. In connection with a fundraiser, 5th graders write letters to different local politicians and to the building owner, too.

⁴ Letter from the town's faction Bündnis 90/Grüne (Green Party) to the students of the *Schiller-Gymnasium* on May 16th, 1995.

Dear Mister,

We, the students of the *Schiller-Gymnasium*, miss our tree very much. It provided shadow and protected us from the traffic noise. Moreover, our school grounds appeared to be more natural. Therefore, we would like to ask you politely, if you could buy a couple of new trees for us. This would not only please us, but also your renters will appreciate, it because these trees would improve the scenery. We will always thank you for that.

Yours sincerely,
Students of the *Schiller-Gymnasium*

8 The Tree Group – A Campaign is Launched

The newly planted trees are the basis of a new plantation project. Students launch an initiative called *The Tree Group*, which has been working on the redesign of the school grounds until today. This group does not only react, moreover, it presents several concepts such as to turn the school grounds into a place to play, to relax and to learn. Open-Air lessons are planned to be given in a *green classroom*. Furthermore, for instance they plan table tennis, hedges, elements to provide visual protection, a huge pergola and to flower one of the building fronts. Well, a redesign of school grounds is nothing new. In a great amount of schools in Germany, the concrete floor is removed from the school grounds and everywhere else good ideas are developed. However, the activities of the *Schiller-Gymnasium* have a special meaning. They do not look for money, but for knowledge and partners among the parents and the city's traders. The reason for that is given on a message board at school: "Are your parents in wood processing or work in the building branch? Are they able to drive construction machines or, are they in a management position of a construction company, or even in a DIY-store?" Further on, *The Tree Group* asks all parents for six tons of grit (0, 2 - 0, 3 cm grain size), six sacks of cement, ca. thirty pieces of squared timber (new, boiler pressure proved, exact measurements), and loads of other things. The youngsters do not wait for adults to take action; likewise they seek support for their own ideas. *The Tree Group* received several recognitions. Even the Mayor plants a new chestnut tree, which he himself brought to their school, at the school grounds together with the students. By doing so, will he be able to regain their trustworthiness in politics?

9 A School Becomes Attached to Politics

The active involvement of students, parents, and teachers to gain a new gym with three sections proved their grown courage to become more engaged in politics. Concerning to this case, the current situation is difficult: At Weimar's biggest *Gymnasium*, sports classes are given in five different gyms. Among these is the *Wimaria-Gym*, which is in a bad state. According to the students and teachers, it is only a question of time when doing sports becomes dangerous. However, they do not care for their own interests only. "In general, there is a modern gym missing in our European Capital of Culture to be," says Denis Taubert, student of the 11th grade, during a round table discussion with the Mayor at their *Gymnasium*.⁵ In order to reinforce their issue, over 400 students take part in a protest march from their school to the town hall on June 6th, 1996. In addition, they collected over 3,000 signatures from Weimar's inhabitants that supported their referendum to build a new gym. The Mayor agreed to their request: "You've got my vote," – states Dr. Germer to the young protesters in front of the town hall.⁶

A second project is launched: The the youngsters weigh the first-graders satchels in order to show the heavy weight that they have to carry day by day. They notice that the new class books are heavier in comparison to the years before and therefore the satchels' weight has increased. Keeping these results in mind, the project's participants visit the Frankfurt book fair in 1996 in order to talk to several publishing houses.

The above-mentioned examples clearly display that since the *Chestnut Case*, the students have continued to assert their claims firmly. In retrospect, Helmut Wuntke, the principle, draws the following conclusion: "Our students' standing as well as the reputation of our *Gymnasium* in public profited from the whole campaign. Everyday life at school has changed because our students know their right to a say. The students actively intervene. In the end, they want to have an influence on their environment and change the social climate of both our school and our town."

Source: Pädagogik. 1997. Vol. 7-8, 46 – 49

⁵ Thüringer Landeszeitung, May, 30th, 1996.

⁶ Thüringer Landeszeitung, June, 7th, 1996.